

I would like to thank Chairman Filner, Ranking Member Buyer, Subcommittee on Health Chairman Michaud and Ranking Member Miller for the opportunity to discuss this issue that is critical to the veterans of the State of New Mexico. Today I am calling on you and members of the Veterans Affairs Committee to support my legislation, H.R. 315, the Help Establish Access to Local Timely Healthcare for Your (HEALTHY) Vets Act.

In New Mexico's rural communities, many of our veterans are deprived of accessible medical facilities and face the high cost of gasoline to travel and to obtain care. My legislation would require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to contract with local doctors and hospitals on a case-by-case basis to provide medical services, including primary care, for those veterans who live far away from VA medical facilities. This would expand the ability of our local health providers in Southern New Mexico to provide more convenient, efficient medical services for veterans who live in areas that are far away from established VA facilities.

Currently, veterans residing in the Southeast New Mexico must drive between 400 and 500 miles roundtrip to receive care at New Mexico's only VA Hospital located in Albuquerque. I consistently hear stories from my constituents about the detrimental impact this long-distance drive has on their ability to access timely care and overall health. One Marine veteran amputee began having uncontrollable drainage from his "good" foot and was making 2 to 3 trips a week to the Albuquerque VA hospital. This equates to 18 hours of drive time a week. After 4 months, he finally lost his foot. Several local civilian health care experts feel the unfortunate travel "marathon" contributed to the failure to save his foot.

Another 87 year old Bataan veteran developed a serious bladder infection and was directed to make the 6 hour roundtrip drive along with his 85 year old wife. Halfway through his treatments prostate cancer was found and additional trips had to be made for chemotherapy. After 7 months of trips, he died and his wife's health was seriously damaged after the strain of such long distance care.

Today, I know you will hear from several national veterans service organizations who may not support my bill and others under consideration today. That is because many of these groups have committed themselves to the goal of "keeping VA dollars inside the VA". I understand this concept and believe at first glance it sounds like a commonsense approach to VA budgeting. But following this logic, the only way to get more localized access to care for veterans in my district would be to build new facilities in areas closer to their homes.

I believe there is a need for a full-service veterans health center in Southern New Mexico and would love to see that come to fruition. However, I am a realistic man as are the veterans living in rural New Mexico. With the tight budgetary constraints our Nation

faces, and the smaller population in states like New Mexico, that idea is much easier said than done. This is a reality veterans living in rural areas have been forced to accept.

Since that solution is not realistic at this time, we must work to find other solutions to this problem that is hurting our veterans with every 6 - 8 hour roundtrip journey to the hospital. Unfortunately, the idea of expanded contracting authority raises flags with certain veterans service organizations that see it as a step toward privatization. They characterize this as the federal government brushing aside its commitment to care for the men and women who have served our Country.

Well I will tell you that the federal government and the VA are not adequately living up to their commitment and serving my constituents under the current system. John Taylor, a life member of the Military Order of the Purple Heart and life member of the Disabled American Veterans, lives in Roswell, NM which is approximately 200 miles away from Albuquerque. In a letter John wrote to me:

“Rural veterans in New Mexico are dying and losing body parts because of a six hour, roundtrip drive to the nearest VA hospital in this state... Our VSO legislative representatives from the DAV, etc. have no experience or live in contact with this issue, as they are from large urban areas with massive facilities and infrastructure for support. The classic response to invitations requesting visits to our rural areas has historically been, “we’ll try, but it takes time to get out there, and we have a very busy schedule.” I submit the same time that is an inconvenience to executives is the same time killing my fellow veterans or at the very least, causing serious exacerbation of their medical problems.”

US Army Retired LTC Charlie Revie, a member of the Uniformed Services Disabled Retirees, noted that the drive from Las Cruces to our only major VA facility is a 250 mile one way trip - from Hobbs, the distance is 320 miles.

The notion that providing contracted care to veterans through local doctors at non-VA facilities is somehow a way to finagle out of caring for them is absurd. Under my legislation, the VA will clearly still pay for the care veterans obtain at non-VA facilities. Veterans in my District and across rural America have been hearing politicians talk about increasing access for years. It is simply imperative Congress take these issues seriously this year.

After the reports regarding conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the House passed the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act, which takes steps to shed light on the bureaucratic process that plagues the VA. It improves communications amongst DoD, VA and Congress and strengthens the process for returning soldiers transitioning into the VA health care system. All these measures are extremely important and I hope the Senate works to pass similar legislation. But we must not just be a reactionary Congress that only finds time to fix issues in light of displeasing media reports. Without any changes to allow veterans more localized access to care, many soldiers returning from

Iraq and Afghanistan who return home to their families in Southern New Mexico will face the extensive 400+ mile trek to the VA Medical Center in Albuquerque.

I appreciate the opportunity to present my legislation to the Committee and speak on this issue which deserves the attention of Congress. Our veterans in rural America deserve no less.